When Is A Syndrome Not A Syndrome?

A desperate mother has spoken out against reforms being made to the categorisation of Asperger’s Syndrome.

Sarah Burke from Douglas, Co. Cork is anxious after hearing the news that her son John, a third year student in Douglas Community School, may no longer receive the help he needs in school to deal with his condition. “John is at a disadvantage in school. He finds making friends and general social situations a lot harder than most children.” John was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at the age of 11. Thanks to his diagnosis, John received special needs assistance throughout secondary school and his mother Sarah believes this was invaluable to her son's progress and education.

A potentially controversial international conference entitled Challenging DSM-5 is being held at Trinity College, Dublin on Friday 8th and Saturday 9th November 2013 to discuss and debate changes in the diagnosis of autism and the dropping of Asperger's Disorder from the DSM-5 American diagnostic system. This seminar will include the launch of “ground-breaking results” from a 10-year TCD study into the use of drama to develop the social skills of young people with Asperger’s syndrome.

The main difference between autism and Asperger’s is those affected by ‘classic autism’ tend to have some degree of intellectual impairment. Several categories (including Asperger’s syndrome) will be replaced by a single diagnostic category of autism spectrum disorders in DSM-5. This change is reported to help more accurately and consistently diagnose people with autism. This does not mean that Asperger’s syndrome is being removed from the DSM classification system, only that it is being placed under a single diagnostic category.

For Sarah Burke, her son is not the first family member who has had to deal with Asperger’s. “My brother, now in his late thirties, was diagnosed with the syndrome fifteen years ago. He found school very difficult and having this diagnosis gave him an identity.” Sarah goes on to mention how having the diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome gave her brother confidence, as he could classify why he was different to other people.

The immediate problem is that those who have already been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome are worried about losing the services they have - particularly after the cut-backs in the recent budget.

It is thought that changes to the classification of Asperger’s Syndrome will potentially affect over 15,000 people across Ireland.